

Reporting School Fires

Office of the
State Fire Marshal



A step-by-step guide for teachers and school administrators

Report all fires in accordance with RCW 19.27 and with International Fire Code 401.3, "In the event an unwanted fire occurs on a property, the owner or occupant shall immediately report such condition to the Fire Department . . . No person shall, by verbal or written directive, require any delay in the reporting of a fire to the fire department." Early access to fire department resources can prevent further property damage and can provide community based intervention strategies for youth that set fires.

1. Reporting Fires

☐ Early Access to Emergency Services.

All fires must be reported immediately upon discovery. In just thirty seconds, a fire doubles in size and within minutes can threaten an entire school. Regardless of the size of the fire and the type of items burned, a fire has the potential to endanger and destroy lives and property in a matter of minutes.

☐ Any Size, Anywhere.

Every fire regardless of its size or location is significant. Report all fires, whether extinguished or still burning, these fires must be investigated by the fire department.

☐ Preserve the scene.

Every time a fire occurs or is discovered, staff should preserve the fire scene immediately until the local fire department can respond to investigate the incident.

☐ Report findings.

Early notification is critical. Prompt and complete reporting assists in identifying youth using fire in an inappropriate and unsafe way and allows for successful community based intervention services.

2. Understanding Youth that Set Fires

☐ Risk Factors

Youth start fires for many reasons. The size of the fire does not reflect the motive of the youth who started the fire. No matter what the reason, intervention is needed to correct the behavior. Some risk factors are: being influenced by peers, showing off for peers, not being aware of the potential legal consequences of their actions, acting impulsively, lacking the ability to concentrate, refusing to cooperate, having a history of abuse, having recently experienced a crisis, having behavior or academic problems, and/or acting out their feelings.

☐ Accountability

Youth who use fire at school or on school grounds threaten the safety of other students and all school staff. They need to be held accountable for their actions. Starting a fire on school property is a criminal act. Regardless of whether charges are filed, all fires need to be taken seriously.

3. Intervention --Youth involved with fire once are five times more likely to use fire inappropriately again unless there is professional intervention.

☐ Fire Department

School fires are seriously underreported. Early identification of a fire and its ignition source can lead to successful community based intervention strategies for youth that set fires. Intervention may include: addressing fire curiosity through education; a screening interview to determine appropriate intervention; making referrals to mental health providers when more extensive evaluation is needed; partnering with law enforcement and juvenile departments; requiring the youth to participate in restitution programs and/or complete community service projects.

☐ Law Enforcement

Firesetting is arson if there is a purposeful plan to destroy property by setting a fire. A criminal investigation should be conducted by law enforcement. Motive and intent must be established. When determined to be a criminal act of arson, firesetting carries with it serious consequences which may include arrest, trial, conviction, restitution and possibly incarceration. Local Crime Stoppers programs have been effective in gaining arson information. The Arson Alarm Foundation has an information award program that can be accessed at 1-800-55-ARSON or at www.arsonalarm.org.

For more information contact your local fire department or the State Fire Marshal's Office at (360) 753-0435.